



Robles, E. (2017). Maxine Walker: Imaging the Homeplace. *Oxford Art Journal*, 40(1), 169-184. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxartj/kcx011>

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'Contemporary black struggle must honor [black women's] history of service just as it must critique the sexist definition of service as women's "natural" role.'<sup>1</sup>

The home is a contested site within feminist discourses and the visual culture that accrues to them. From the ambivalence of the late 1970s, made evident in the 'anti-Julia Child' aesthetic of Martha Rosler's *The Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), to more recent scholarship around the rise of the 'new domesticity', the home has been assessed and reassessed as a gendered and inherently political space.<sup>2</sup> However, what is often occluded in conversations around both formations – from the domestic prison of generations of women, from Betty Friedan to Betty Draper, to the fetishisation of the Kitchenaid – are the lived experiences of women, who because of race or class (or, of course, both) fall outside of them. As celebrated writer and theorist bell hooks outlines in her essay, 'Rethinking the nature of work' (1984), the central tenet of Friedan's seminal work *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), that work outside the home was key to women's liberation, produces a deeply problematic binary of work and home that reflects the exclusionary nature of mainstream feminism orientated towards the experiences of educated, well-off white women.<sup>3</sup> What Friedan's binary, which continues to echo through feminist debates today, seems to ignore is that even as she wrote, a vast number of women were already working outside the home in jobs that did not liberate them from much of anything.<sup>4</sup> Within a British context, for example, both Afro-Caribbean men *and women* were recruited and chose to migrate to Britain in the postwar period precisely to work.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (1984) Peter Fryer notes that only five percent of women who migrated from the Caribbean during the Windrush era had no skills whilst half were non-

manual works and over a quarter were skilled manual workers.<sup>6</sup> Whilst the mainstream liberal feminisms of the 1960s and 1970s posited a divide between work and family-life as Hazel V. Carby writes, 'black women bridged this division. They were viewed simultaneously as workers and as wives and mothers.'<sup>7</sup>

In her 1990 essay, titled 'Homeplace (a site for resistance)', hooks revisits and reconfigures the complex relationship between a shifting feminist discourse, race and domesticity.<sup>8</sup> She takes into account the 'double burden' of wage labour and housework carried by many women of colour, who are often, as Carby writes, 'seen to fail as mothers precisely because of their position as workers' and examines the radical possibilities of the home.<sup>9</sup> Whilst acknowledging the role of sexism in the delegation of homemaking to women, she writes, 'it does not matter that sexism assigned them this role.'<sup>10</sup> Rather she theorises the value of 'homeplace' as a domestic, and uniquely powerful, response to the material realities of American racial apartheid. A safe space away from the lived experiences of the culture of white supremacy, it represents a place of refuge, regeneration and, crucially, resistance for generations of black Americans. 'We could not learn to love or respect ourselves [...] on the outside; it was there on the inside, in that 'homeplace' ... that we had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture our spirits', she writes.<sup>11</sup> It was in the homeplace, made and kept by black women - who often were simultaneously engaged in domestic labour for white households - 'where all black people could strive to be subject, not objects'.<sup>12</sup>

Though hooks formulates her own engagement with the homeplace in an African-American context, she identifies in it a potency that crosses the

boundaries of space and time; from the hands of her own mother and grandmother to the hands of black women around the world.<sup>13</sup> This article will examine the ways in which race, gender and class converge upon this early 1990s formation of homeplace in works by the Birmingham-based British photographer Maxine Walker and interrogate the transnational possibilities of hooks' framework, rooted deeply in the paradigms of African American histories and experiences.<sup>14</sup> Turning her camera to the 'front rooms' and bedrooms of the black Atlantic in her *Front Rooms* project (1987-8) and *Black Beauty* (1991), Walker plays at the interstices of space and place; subject and object; presence and absence. She unravels the threads of nostalgia, consumerism, femininity, taste and the rituals of self-performance woven through public and private domestic spaces fraught with the dynamics of diaspora. Summoning the spectre of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and a uniquely Black British aesthetic documented in artist, curator and scholar Michael MacMillan's expansive *The West Indian Front Room* project, here Walker makes room for the possibilities of homeplace as a paradigm for a radical domesticity rooted in black womanhood.

The works considered here form a small, but no less important, part of a much wider dialogue that swirled around the 1980s and early 1990s as artists, critics, curators and theorists re-examined and reassessed the intersections of race, class, gender, representation and the home. Most famously, perhaps, the complexities of the space are the subject of Rachel Whiteread's monumental sculptures *Ghost* (1990) and, later, *House* (1993-4). Within the complex circuitry of the black Atlantic, earlier notions of 'the old homestead', the 'community' and the 'motherland' which figured prominently in the politically infused aesthetics

of the 1960s and 1970s, also came under new scrutiny. As Richard J. Powell notes, works such as Lorna Simpson's *Five Rooms* (1991) and Beverly Buchanan's reproductions of African American homes in the deep South, highlight a shift from the domestic ideals of the American Civil Rights Movement and Black Power eras to 'a more cynical view of "the hood"' during this period.<sup>15</sup> Moving beyond the American specificity of Powell's assessment – the urban housing policies that promoted segregation and gave rise to 'the hood', the landscapes and traumas of the rural South – these 'multiple views of place and position' are woven through works by the constellation of artists who –like Walker – participated in what has come to be known as the British Black Arts Movement. The implications and possibilities of home are explored by artists including Donald Rodney, Keith Piper, Sonia Boyce, Mona Hatoum and filmmaker Martina Attille. Unpicking the tangled threads of politics and aesthetics, the complex bodies of work produced on either side of the Atlantic examine the many implications of 'home' as a space shaped by both the ever-changing dynamics of nostalgia, desire and belonging and the fixity of personal and community 'roots'.

### *Into the Front Room*

In the *Front Room* series, for which she produced portraits of subjects in their front rooms, Walker brings the viewer into the titular space, loaded with the implications and connotations of postcolonial exchange.<sup>16</sup> In the broadest sense, the 'front room' can include the living and sitting rooms and represents the public space within the private domestic sphere. Emanating from the Victorian parlour – a formal reception space in the home – it is often reserved for

receiving guests and visitors and is the household venue for social entertaining.<sup>17</sup>

In the colonial, and later postcolonial, context of the West Indies and the West Indian diaspora, however, the 'front room' is given new and more complex meanings. These are made central in portraits of British Afro-Caribbean families in their homes produced in the 1970s and early 1980s by artists such as Neil Kenlock, Vanley Burke and Armet Francis. These images, part of a wider project of documenting the lives and experiences of Britain's black communities, were often disseminated in publications like *West Indian World*, where Kenlock served as staff photographer. They bring together the aesthetics and sensibilities of documentary photography with the incontrovertible drive to assert and affirm the complexities, multiplicities and mundanities of black British life. Neatly dressed subjects pose in their lusciously decorated front rooms – sometimes in front of a television set, sometimes holding the receiver of a telephone to their ear as though in conversation with an unseen other – they look out to the viewer as if to say 'we are here. We have made it. We belong.'

More recently, the front room is the subject of artist, writer and curator Michael McMillan's *The West Indian Front Room* (2005-9). In this expansive project, McMillan interrogates the 'iconic aesthetic' of the space and its relationship to the social and political histories of black people in Britain.<sup>18</sup> He finds its roots in the homes of an aspirant and emerging middle class in the West Indies and, later, the material realities of post-war migrants faced with cramped living conditions and financial hardship. Whilst McMillan grounds his project in an investigation of the aesthetic and material construction of the front room, bringing the space to life in the galleries of the Geffrye Museum (before moving to institutions further afield), its focus lies in remembering and reassessing a

‘contact zone’ - where ‘cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other’ – at the centre of late twentieth-century black British life.<sup>19</sup>

This conception of the space as a ‘contact zone’ reflects its unique formation at the interstices of race and class. Indeed, whilst McMillan notes the importance of the front room in white, working-class British households, he highlights the crucial differences between these rooms and their counterparts in West Indian households. Where both rooms are inscribed with aspirations towards middle class aesthetics and notions of ‘respectability’, the West Indian ‘front room’ is woven through with the experiences of migration and assimilation that underpin the stories of black settlers in Britain. Mirroring hooks’ description of homeplace, McMillan writes that ‘the front room could be an ostentatious display of wealth through material reality, but it was also a treasuring for tomorrow of dreams that had been deferred.’<sup>20</sup> It was a space to regroup and re-gather within a social and political context that was openly hostile to black people. As one commentator put it in *Tales from the Front Room*, the television programme McMillan produced as a part of his project, ‘it was almost like a physical sanctuary... because you never knew what was going to happen out in the street at that time’.<sup>21</sup>

For McMillan this status as ‘contact zone’ is enunciated clearly through the aesthetics of the front room. He begins his essay, “‘West Indian’ Front Room: Reflections on a Diasporic Phenomenon’ with a prolonged quotation from Daniel Miller’s ‘Fashion and Ontology in Trinidad’ in which Miller enumerates the features of the space:

The floors are carpeted, often with the high pile carpet locally termed ‘plush’. The furniture consists of thick-foam based seats covered in a fake

velvet, arranged in sets of one or often two couches, plus armchairs often providing upholstered seating...Artificial flowers are extremely common, often set into elaborate arrangements with perhaps half a dozen examples within the living room. There is a buffet which is a glass-fronted cabinet filled with china and glassware...Wall decorations will be dominated by a machine-made tapestry with a religious theme, such as the Last Supper...prints of oil paintings with gilt surrounds...Prints with a West Indian theme would very rarely be found in the normative living room.<sup>22</sup>

This checklist of sorts is satisfied in Walker's series, which was partially displayed as a part of the exhibition at the Geffrye. When viewed together the first two images from the series, *Auntie Linda's Front Room 1* and *Auntie Linda's Front Room 2*, present a comprehensive view of the eponymous space. There are, of course, large pieces of furniture – a sofa, a sideboard, a small curio, a television set, an electric fire- and the small decorative detritus that fills the surfaces of the home – lamps, vases filled with flowers, glass fish, a clock, framed photographs. There are, too, the elements and textures that comprise and cover the peripheries of the room – a thick carpet covered strategically with a small rug, curtains that peak out from behind the sofa, and floral wallpaper carefully hung with framed pictures and a clock. The space is full, with an almost Baroque aesthetic, dripping in tassels, chintz and doilies. Without a subject in the frame, the intention of the images seems clear – the room itself is under scrutiny, its minutiae made available for the viewer to dissect.

Together with the aesthetics of the space – the things that fill it – Miller's list alludes to the sensory experience of actually being in the front room: its carpet is plush, its seats velvety. In his project, McMillan also emphasizes the



smell of the space (Windolene, air fresheners, paraffin), its sounds (radios, *commess* and 'Gentleman Jim') and its tastes (Babycham, ginger beer and black cake).<sup>23</sup> Despite the emphasis on the aesthetic of the front room, it is ultimately a living space, whose function and status as homeplace is at the heart of both family and community life. It is a room to be lived in. However, unlike McMillan, who brought the front room to life in the gallery space, Walker's photographs hold the viewer at a distance. Though she allows the viewer to see the outer shell of the space – its sheen – we cannot feel what it is to walk over the 'plush carpet' or to sit on or run our fingers over the 'fake velvet' seats, to listen to the radio, or to sit and gossip with friends. The ambiguity of the space where 'the efficacy of display was sometimes more important than the authenticity of the objects' is amplified.<sup>24</sup> The viewer cannot feel the flowers (*are* they artificial?) or inspect the tapestry (*is* it machine made?). Walker alludes to the sensorial experience of the space only in the television set in *Auntie Linda* (Fig. 1) which is switched on. Even here, though, the picture is frozen and the soundtrack silenced by Walker's camera. The viewer can imagine the front room as the setting for the functions McMillan describes – parties, religious services, funerals - but is only permitted to glimpse the traces of the living 'contact zone'.

Whilst McMillan's invocation of the front room produces rich and interesting outcomes and intersects with Walker's series and hooks' framework of homeplace, it is crucial to resist conflating the three. Indeed, whilst McMillan's expansive project was rooted in looking back to the Kenlock-era space through the fuzzy lens of nostalgia, Walker's series images the front room as a space for both reflection and creation, a space that is always in process and under construction. Articulated through the aesthetics of documentary photography

produced by Kenlock, Burke, Armet and – more immediately– Martin Parr and Paul Graham, Walker's tutors at the West Surrey College of Art and Design, her front rooms spring from a 'conscious decision to document black women's lives using the front room as a point from which to draw their different lives together'.<sup>25</sup> This impulse, to document and depict the lives of black women in Britain to be certain that 'we produce images of ourselves', is also central to the important work that Walker did during this period as a member of the Black Women and Photography Group, a leading figure in the production of the seminal journal *Polareyes* and a member of the North Paddington Community darkroom alongside Joy Gregory and Ulrike Priess.<sup>26</sup>

The starting point for Walker's series is to claim 'a woman's room of her own', itself an allusion to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929). According to Woolf, for a woman to create she must first be in possession of two things: space – the titular room of her own – and the financial means to support her endeavours.<sup>27</sup> Woolf's thesis has been roundly criticized, not least by writer Alice Walker, for the inherent economic privilege it presumes in extolling the virtues of choice and opportunity that exclude the material realities of many women of colour, for whom 'a room of one's own' is just not an option.<sup>28</sup> Whilst (Maxine) Walker's work is, in part, a corrective response to the exclusionary nature of Woolf's space – these are rooms that belong to black women in black households - she also seems to look beyond the prescriptive equation to play with and within the spaces opened up by Woolf's discourse. She brings to life the statement that,

when a subject is highly controversial – and any question about sex is that – one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one came to

hold whatever opinion one does hold. One can only give ones' audience the chance of drawing their own conclusion as they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncracies of the speaker.<sup>29</sup>

Training her lens on the front rooms made and kept and lived in by black women, Walker examines homeplace as a site for the processes and prejudices that create, perform and destabilize fixed notions of 'self' and 'other', private and public.

The image most directly linked, perhaps, to Woolf's essay is one that was not included in McMillan's exhibition. Titled *Sonia Front Room I* it depicts the celebrated artist Sonia Boyce sitting on what appears to be a bed.<sup>30</sup> She is casually dressed, barefoot and curled up comfortably. She looks up from a book, though its title is concealed from view by the leg that it rests upon. She is surrounded by the products of her artistic practice and the detritus of a lived-in room. Above the bed, a mixed media collage is tacked to the wall. To its side, and only just in view, is the bottom corner of the largescale chalk and pastel drawing *Auntie Enid - The Pose* (1985) (Fig. 2). One of Boyce's early works, it depicts an Aunt (in this case, Auntie Enid) in her front room. Enid stands proudly, dressed up and posed with her hand on her hip in front of richly patterned wall paper in a composition that at once recalls Kenlock's documentary images and William Morris's rich prints. However only Enid's shoes and a part of the carpet on which she stands are on view here, the rest of her body cropped out by the camera's selective focus. The patterns of Enid's wall-paper are similarly excluded from view, though they seem to echo through the photograph in the form of shadows cast onto the wall behind Boyce. Below *Auntie Enid* there are photographs and postcards, a mirror (in which the bright flash from Walker's camera is partially

reflected) on a bookcase filled with books and bottles of perfume, hairspray, and body lotion. This is not the pristinely tidy and organised front room described by Miller and McMillan and made visual in Walker's photographs of Auntie Linda's space.

Here, the only sign of Miller's formula is in Auntie Enid's décor and, yet, Walker tells us, this is a front room; Sonia's front room. In her assessment of the Auntie Linda photographs, Gilane Tawadros remarks that sitting at the interface of the two previous frames, Linda 'reconciles the central vistas of the preceding images by anchoring the disparate objects and images in the specificity of an individual life.'<sup>31</sup> Like Linda, here Boyce looks directly to the viewer, temporarily distracted from her still opened book. She mediates between mundane and mass produced – the striped bedspread, the brightly patterned pillow cases, the pink bottle of hairspray – and her own creative production; between the permanence of the artwork and the ethereal interplay of shadow and camera flash.

Furthermore, like Linda, Boyce gazes unflinchingly at the viewer. This is her room and the viewer is only allowed to peer into it. She enacts hooks' defiant declaration: 'not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality.'<sup>32</sup> And here, it does. It marks her out as the creator of this homeplace that, not unlike Woolf's 'room of her own', provides a safe space, a space to rest, read and make her own.

Crucially, *Sonia's Front Room I* also complicates the romanticised narrative, promulgated by McMillan's project, that insists that the 'front room' no longer exists. Rather, placed squarely in the past, associated more with the Windrush era's settlers than their British-born children, it is something to be remembered and memorialized. Indeed, both *Tales from the Front Room* and *The Front Room: Migrant Aesthetics in the Home* are woven through with memories of

growing up in – and being kept out of – the front room by parents born elsewhere. These are memories of a space built and ruled over by mothers, grandmothers and aunties; the sound of laughter and gossip heard through the closed door, the ornaments no one is allowed to touch, the decorative pillows that must not be moved. Crucially, hooks' reflections on homeplace share this generational dynamic as she opens her essay with her own memories of visiting her grandmother's house. Despite the presence of her grandfather, she writes that

in our young minds houses belonged to women, were their special domain, not as property, but as places where all that truly mattered in life took place – the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls.<sup>33</sup>

For hooks this generational shift away the front room is emblematic of the shift away from the radical possibilities of homeplace and towards the 'compulsive consumerism' at the root of the apolitical, white bourgeois domestic space that earlier feminists such as Friedan rallied against.

However, this paradigm, which builds the front room (and the homeplace) as a space built by black women in service of the black community risks slipping into the territory of reactive and reductive stereotypes. The 'black superwoman' looms large here.<sup>34</sup> As Paul Gilroy writes in his essay 'It's a Family Affair: Black Culture and the Trope of Kinship' (1993), in what begins to look like a disaster for 'black feminism [...] those definitions of authenticity are disproportionately defined by ideas around nurturance, about family, about fixed gender roles, and generational responsibilities.'<sup>35</sup> Positioning black women as the agents and means for racial and cultural reproduction that must always take

place in the private sphere of the home, these tropes, he asserts, service an 'authoritarian pastoral patriarchy'.<sup>36</sup> Whilst Gilroy raises a number of interesting and valid questions around hooks' notion of homeplace and the wider shifts taking place in dialogues in and around the Black Atlantic, which gave rise in the 1980s and 1990s to the language of 'homeboys' and 'homegirls', 'sisters' and 'brothers', his critique also highlights the ways in which Walker's work complicates hooks' theory. In her front rooms she brings to life a space that operates somewhere between the fixity of 'roots' and the flowing circuitry of 'routes'; between public and private (both as 'front room' and as photograph); radical politics and bourgeois consumerism.<sup>37</sup> The objects in Linda's front room that, for Walker, become 'substitutes of another life I have never known. A past I will never re-live' weaving together' are woven together with the paintings, photos and nail varnish of Sonia's space.<sup>38</sup> The spaces Walker brings to life are made both by Aunties and by young artists to interrogate the fixity of ideas around who 'black women' are, what they do and the front rooms that they make. Transported across the centuries old trans-Atlantic routes between Britain, the United States and the Anglophone Caribbean, homeplace here is forged from the material realities of migration, assimilation and aspiration as much as the racial apartheid at the centre of hooks' American experience.

Indeed, Walker's camera seems to complicate and neutralise the radical possibilities of the homeplace in her representation of the front room. The room that is 'home for community resistance' is, in Walker's photographs, emptied of the people that comprise a community.<sup>39</sup> This act of dis-arming the room is potent and allows Walker to work in the spaces between subject and object. The front rooms recall and play with the representational conventions of the Sunday

colour supplements and the numerous home design magazines - with titles like *Home and Style*, *Ideal Home*, *Home and Garden*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Heart Home*, etc. – targeted at women. For McMillan both Walker's series and the documentary images that they emulate 'claim to represent all that makes the subject individual by putting under public scrutiny the material evidence of their private life.'<sup>40</sup> Whilst McMillan provides an interesting point of similarity between Walker's front rooms and the glossy magazines, it seems to fall short. Indeed, it seems that at the root of the photographic spreads of the trendy interiors that Walker plays on is a consumerist desirability predicated on anonymity, rather than a glimpse into an absent subject's private life. Whilst there are hints of the inhabitants of the (nearly always) expensively furnished rooms in their equally expensive homes, what is captured in the Sunday supplements is a lifestyle of beautiful things (and homes and families) on offer for the reader's aspiration and consumption. As Martin Slavin writes, 'such images, when printed can offer the brief intensity of a desirable moment stilled, allowing comparison of our lot with their situation.'<sup>41</sup>

If 'private lives are placed under public scrutiny', as McMillan claims, they are carefully edited and constructed versions of a domestic ideal rooted more in mass appeal than the material realities of the domestic space – knitted together by memories and experiences - that he examines in his project. Arguably, the subject of these images is not Auntie Linda or Sonia (or any of the other semi-anonymous home-owners), but the room and all that is in it. As Slavin notes, 'one way in which consumer journalism stereotypes people is by displaying them with the accoutrements that seem to make them identifiable at a glance.'<sup>42</sup>

However, here Walker represents an image of black domesticity that disrupts the stereotypical images of black womanhood rooted in the act of looking after children (hers or other people's) and keeping house (hers or other people's). She substitutes the trendy, aspirational interiors represented in the glossy magazines with ones that are created by black women. However, this substitution of black for white does not merely represent a 'positive image' of black life, a clear-cut alternative to racist stereotypes. Rather, playing in the spaces between the apolitical rooms of the Sunday supplements and the radical homeplace, Walker highlights the complexities woven through the front room and all that it contains. In the Auntie Linda photographs she brings to life a consumerism rooted in aspiration but manifested in a uniquely black British formation; an almost formulaic aesthetic, so perfectly documented by McMillan, is brought to life by its lived reality as a place where, as hooks writes, 'we return for renewal and self-recovery, where we can heal our wounds and become whole.'<sup>43</sup> However, whilst this aesthetic is summoned in Walker's photographs of Auntie Linda's space, the front room is not interchangeable, nor does one size fit all. It is not a stand-in for a consummate Black British visual essence or a fetishisation of cultural and racial 'roots'. Rather, *this* is Auntie Linda's room, and *that* is Sonia's room.

#### *From front rooms to bedrooms*

In his assessment of the complexities that underpin the formation of an emergent black British identity, titled 'Aspiration and Attitude...Reflections on Black Britain in the Nineties', Stuart Hall describes the dynamics of those spaces that he calls 'frontlines' and 'backyards'. Frontlines, he asserts are the public



contact zones between black culture and the white mainstream, whilst backyards are the location for private exchange and negotiation, away from the possibility of confrontation that defines its counterpart.<sup>44</sup> Whilst in many ways, the front room is configured by its aesthetics as a 'frontline', a 'politicised edge' between marginal and mainstream, in *Black Beauty* (1991) Walker brings the viewer into the private, 'backyard' space of the bedroom. Unlike Auntie Linda's front room, which is presented in large survey-like chunks, here she presents a series of close-up images of an intimate homeplace fragmented by her lens. The title of the first image in the series, *Her Room* (Fig. 3), seems to promise a view similar to those in the earlier work, a broad overview of at least some of the eponymous space. However, it is actually comprised of a zoomed-in photograph of small objects on a table. A container with cotton wool overflows onto a lace doily to the left, whilst a pair of shapely bottles rest carefully orientated alongside a small glass jar on another to the right. A pair of earrings and a small magnifying mirror sit between the two tableaux. There is a simple bed made in white linens and a nightstand covered with similarly white cloth, upon which sits a vase of flowers in the out-of-focus background. Whilst the bed makes it evident that this is a bedroom, the room's sparse décor emphasizes its status as something that is at once between bedroom and boudoir; living space and photo shoot.

There is little evidence of the 'individual life' of the domestic or community space here. With the exception of the objects on the table, there is no sign of the room's occupant – nothing is out of place, nothing is left behind, there are no photographs, or carefully chosen ornaments. Only the title of the work and the objects' association with feminine beauty rituals indicate the gender of

the unseen 'her'. Furthermore, unlike the image of the front room – with its plush seats and rich décor on show – the space of the photograph here is both highly detailed and, simultaneously, exclusive. The viewer is not drawn into the room; there is nowhere to sit, nothing to inspect more closely and no one to engage with. It is a space stripped of all but the traces of the lived experiences that constitute homeplace. This sense of ambivalence is compounded in the next three images, *Toner*, *Eye Gel* and *Cotton Wool*. As the titles suggest, these photographs consist of similarly detailed, close-ups of each named component in isolation. The fragment of the room depicted at the outset of the series is further fragmented.

Here, as in *Auntie Linda's Front Room*, Walker plays with the camera as mediator of visibility and invisibility. Whilst in the earlier series the small details of the front room were rendered invisible – or at least, blurry – for the sake of some sense of 'wholeness', here the room is obscured by the camera's selective focus. This degree of close detail in works like *Cotton Wool* and *Eye Gel* produces a kind of synaesthesia, allowing the viewer to *see* the way that each object might feel. The light captures the fluffy, undulating surface of the cotton wool and the viscous liquidity of the gel, highlighting the tactility of these intrinsically utilitarian tools. However, the tight framing of the images excludes the possibility of interaction, both from outside of the frame and from within. There is simply no room for 'her'. The practiced space of the room – the people, interactions, events that make-up homeplace - gives way in these painterly images to the fixity of place.

It is vital to note that despite the isolation of each object, the stripping away of their context, they also remain fixed by stereotypes around gender. The

bottle of toner is, perhaps, the most stereotypically feminine with its depiction of the shapely and delicate bottle filled with the ritualistic potion. However, even the other seemingly innocuous – even utilitarian – vessels also seem subtly to signal traditional ideas around femininity and feminine beauty through their contents (eye gel) and display. The cotton wool sits atop a lace doily, a simple decorative choice bound up in questions of ‘women’s work’ and the gendered and raced frontier between art and craft.<sup>45</sup> As if to erase any uncertainty over the implications of the space, the title clarifies its position – this is ‘hers’. Though Walker can decontextualize each object on display in ‘her room’, she does not and, perhaps, cannot free them from the fixity of their cultural associations. Where the aesthetic of the front room is predicated on a collection of objects and decorative decisions working in concert, here each element signifies on its own.<sup>46</sup> The viewer is forced to confront their own set of assumptions and expectations to question how things come to signify. Confronting the processes that attach meaning, the images open up a space of exchange that complicates the process of merely looking in to ‘her room’.

Following a sequence similar to that of *Auntie Linda’s Front Room*, Walker begins *Black Beauty* by focusing on the room and its contents, only bringing the human subject – ‘her’ — into the frame towards its end. Unlike the earlier work however, here the subject is Walker herself, who enters the frame twice, first in *Her* (Fig. 4) and again in the final photograph, *Cleansing* (Fig. 5). The images are drastically different from each other and from the earlier portraits of Auntie Linda and Sonia Boyce. Walker’s appearance in *Her* is enigmatic. She is seated in front of a window with her back turned to the camera, which captures the top of her naked back, her shoulders and the back of her head. The curtains of the

window, which appear to be made from the same white linen that covers the bed and tables in the room, are drawn shut; the room is contained, quarantined. Her dark hair and skin create a sharp contrast against the light backdrop in a jarring departure from the grey-scale of the other images. Though this contrast emphasizes the outline of the body, its details remain visible to the viewer; the textures and shapes of Walker's own body are highlighted here, mirroring the depictions of the cotton wool or eye gel. The contours of her flesh where a bra strap digs in slightly, the pores in her skin, her braids and, the thin wisps of hair that have managed to elude them, are all on view.

Hair, skin, body: each a site of 'othering' and steeped in raced and gendered notions of 'good' and 'bad', 'ugly' and 'beautiful'. Highlighting and isolating the physical difference that lies at the root of racist and sexist hierarchies, Walker's self-portrait evokes the assumptions and implications around the over-determined bodies of black women. As art historian Kobena Mercer writes in his essay 'Black Hair/Style Politics' (1987), published only a few years before Walker's work was produced, both hair and skin have been 'historically devalued as the most visible stigmata of blackness' whilst women's bodies are variously valued and devalued.<sup>47</sup> To extrapolate on Mercer's writing around hair, here the black body and, moreover, the black woman's body 'is never a straight-forward biological fact.'<sup>48</sup> Rather, it is raced and gendered, shaped and distorted by the processes of signification and meaning that converge upon it. Crucially, it is Walker's own body that is presented, exposed as a place practiced by the viewer's gaze. Here, however, rather than a 'distinct location, a location it defines' as imagined by Michel de Certeau, this place – this over determined black woman's body - is repeatedly *defined by* its difference; its

non-whiteness and its femininity.<sup>49</sup> Whilst removed from the 'frontlines' of the front room, the circuitry of exchange that belies the construction of 'self' courses through Walker's bedroom.

In the final image of the series, *Cleansing*, the isolated subjects from the other images are brought together. Walker sits at the table with a towel covering her hair. Her breasts are obscured behind the table and mirror but she appears to be topless, mirroring the expanse of nude back in *Her*. Though again, as in *Her Room*, the frame of the camera includes a substantial glimpse of the domestic space in which the sequence takes place, the bed and nightstand from that image are absent here. Whilst Walker carefully framed each section of her front rooms providing the viewer with a comprehensive view of the space, here the room remains fragmented. She sits in front of the curtained window that she faces in *Her*. The room is still closed in and the outside world shut out. She looks into the mirror in front of her whilst dabbing her face with a tuft of cotton wool. Her lips are pursed in concentration and a drop of bright white cream drips from the wool and runs down her cheek. The unused objects sit carefully arranged around her – ready to be picked up, poured out, put on, used. They are no longer things to be looked at but functional elements of the subject's life.

The composition seems to recall Marie-Guillemine Benoist's *Portrait of a Black Woman* (1800). Seated on a delicate *ancien regime* chair in a stark space, with a simple white sheet twisted into a headdress and another covering only one breast, Benoist's subject peers out to the viewer. Benoist initiates a system of looking between the artist (an aristocratic European woman), the viewer and the subject. Though like Sonia and Auntie Linda, the unnamed black woman looks directly to the viewer, it is impossible to reconcile her pose to hooks'

oppositional gaze. Rather, gingerly covered and partially exposed, she remains on view for the consumption of artist and viewer alike. The presence of the mirror in Walker's self-portrait and her intent focus on it breaks down this hierarchical system of looking and here she isolates the rhythms of looking and seeing between subject, mirror and viewer. Peering into the mirror Walker constructs a system of looks that disperses identification among different figures. She plays in the Lacanian spaces between the imaginary and the real; the ego and the body. She creates a spatial ambivalence with the criss-crossing of looks between Walker, the mirror and the viewer. For Foucault the mirror represents a 'mixed, joint' experience' of utopia and heterotopia that plays in the slippages between real and unreal, absent and present.

In the mirror, I see myself where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror... From the standpoint of the mirror, I discover my absence from the place where I am, since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am.<sup>50</sup>

Whilst this complex process of seeing, discovering and reconstituting is laid bare, in fact its outcome is hidden from the viewer, who cannot see the mirror's reflection: the construction of the self remains private.

In his assessment of the wider developments in photography at the end of the twentieth century, Mark Sealy notes that by the early 1990s:

Black self portraiture [had] clearly broken many of its links with the dominant western humanist celebration of self and become more of a staking of a claim, a wager in how 'the subject' is constructed, represents itself or is performed... The subject is caught in midstream, "becoming" something different: subjects-in-process.<sup>51</sup>

Sealy notes that 'these selves are not primarily related to location in the usual sense of "place".' Whilst he ties them to the experience 'of migration...and the struggle to live subjectively within multiple locations' his analysis seems to de-centre the spaces where this 'becoming' occurs.<sup>52</sup> However, it would seem that in these works by Walker, this matter of space – and more specifically of domestic space – is inextricably linked to the processes that occur within. Turning her camera to the front rooms and bedrooms of the Black Atlantic, Walker examines homeplace both as a site for self-construction and as a subject in its own right. Whilst hooks' configuration foregrounds the radical possibilities of a functional space – a space of regeneration and resistance – here Walker highlights the complexities that arise when this functionality comes to life; where it intersects with taste, desire, aspiration, and self-construction and is woven through with ideas around race, gender, class, generation and nationality. Here, the radical possibilities of homeplace shift from the construction and regeneration of communities to the construction and regeneration of selves – of Auntie Linda, Sonia and Walker herself. The place where black women's labour allows '*all black people ... to be subjects not objects*', is reconfigured in these

works and given a new potency as a domestic space where *black women* become subjects; where they regenerate and nurture *themselves*.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (South End Press: Boston, 1990), p. 42.

<sup>2</sup> For some insight into the discourse around the New Domesticity see Emily Matchar, *Homeward Bound: Why Women are Embracing the New Domesticity* (Simon & Schuster: New York, 2013); Radhika Gajjala, 'When Your Seams Get Undone, Do you Learn to Sew or to Kill Monsters?', *The Communication Review Special Issue: The Future of Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2015, pp. 23-26; Emmanuelle Dirix, 'Stitched Up – Representations of Contemporary Vintage Style Mania and the Dark Side of the Popular Knitting Revival', *TEXTILE: Cloth and Culture*, vol. 12, no. 21, 2015, pp. 86-99.

<sup>3</sup> bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (South End Press: Boston, 1984), pp. 96-107.

<sup>4</sup> For insight into recent debates around the afterlives of Friedan and second wave liberal feminism more broadly see Delilah Campbell, 'Housewives Choice?', *Trouble & Strife*, vol. 42, 2001, pp. 2-12; also see the published outcomes of the 'REACT: *The Feminine Mystique* at fifty' symposium in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> One well known example of the active recruitment of women from the Caribbean is then Conservative Health Minister Enoch Powell's efforts to encourage nurses to settle in the UK in the early 1960s. For more information, see Ann Kramer, *Many Rivers to Cross: Caribbean People in the NHS 1948-69* (Stationery Office: London, 2006); Beverly Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe *Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* (Virago: London, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (Pluto Press: London, 1984) pp. 372-3.

<sup>7</sup> Hazel V. Carby, 'White Woman Listen!' in Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (eds.), *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain* (Hutchison Press: London, 1982), p. 230. It is vital to note that this division – between working woman and devoted mother – is one that still exists. However, due to the rapidly rising costs of living and the still growing number of women entering the workforce – in the UK and USA at the very least – it has expanded its reaches to women across the lines of race and class.

<sup>8</sup> This shift from mainstream liberal feminism – embodied by Friedan – towards frameworks that acknowledge and account for the intersections of race, class position and gender can be seen in the debates that raged through the feminist publication *Spare Rib* from the early 1980s (see *Spare Rib*, vol. 132, 1982). It can also be seen in the development of alternative frameworks, including



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'womanism', developed by Alice Walker in Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Harcourt Brace, New York, 1983).

<sup>9</sup> The 'double burden' is examined in Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (The Women's Press: London, 1982) p. 231. Again, it is vital to remember that the 'double burden' has not been alleviated. Also see Heidi Safia Mirza, *Young, Female and Black* (Routledge: London, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> hooks, *Yearning*, p. 41

<sup>11</sup> hooks, *Yearning*, p. 42.

<sup>12</sup> hooks, *Yearning*, p. 42.

<sup>13</sup> Whilst hooks states explicitly that homeplace is part of a shared global experience of black womanhood, she makes mention, specifically, of thinking about homeplace in relation apartheid-era South Africa in hooks, *Yearning*, p. 43.

<sup>14</sup> It is vital to emphasise here that I am working from the position of a critical dialogue that developed in the 1980s and early 1990s in response to the 'mainstream' liberal and overwhelmingly white and middle class feminisms of the preceding decades. Whilst contemporary debates have yielded rich and interesting outcomes, by critically positioning myself within the late 1980s and early 1990s, I aim to reflect how the complexities of those discourses are mirrored in the political and aesthetic practice of Maxine Walker.

<sup>15</sup> Richard J. Powell, *Black Art and Culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), p. 172.

<sup>16</sup> This project is variously referred in the limited extant literature (Gilane Tawadros, 'Redrawing the Boundaries', *Critical Decade: Black Photography in the 1980s*, special issue, *Ten:8*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1992, pp. 86-91, p.90; Michael McMillan, *The Front Room: Migrant Aesthetics in the Home* (Black Dog Publishing: London, 2009)) as *Auntie Linda's Front Room* and also just as *Front Rooms* in Walker's papers held in the archives of Autograph/ABP.

<sup>17</sup> See Judith Flanders, *The Victorian House: Domestic Life from Childhood to Deathbed* (Harper Perennial: London, 2004).

<sup>18</sup> The project encompassed multiple gallery exhibitions in Britain and abroad, a published catalogue of the same name, an interactive website co-organised with the Institute for International Visual Arts in London, and a televised BBC4 documentary entitled *Tales from the Front Room*, dir. Zimena Percival, BBC4, 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Here, I refer to the 'contact zone' formulated by Mary Louise Pratt in 'Arts of the Contact Zone' in David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky (eds.), *Ways of Reading*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Bedford/St. Martins: New York, 1999), p. 62.

<sup>20</sup> Michael McMillan 'The West Indian Front Room: Reflections on a Diasporic Phenomenon', *Kunapip* 30:2(2008) p. 54-5.

<sup>21</sup> *Tales from the Front Room*, dir. Zimena Percival, BBC4, 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel Miller, 'Fashion and Ontology in Trinidad', Jerry Palmer and Mo Dodson, (eds.), *Design and Aesthetics: A Reader* (Routledge: London, 1996), p. 136.

<sup>23</sup> 'Gentleman Jim' is a reference to Jim Reeves, a popular singer who recorded songs from many genres. According to McMillan he 'sang about transcending the trials and tribulations of every day life in recurring themes of loneliness, love, infidelity and loss that echo the hymns, spirituals and gospels of the black Christian church...' (McMillan, *West Indian Front Room*, p. 54-6). *Commess* is defined by the OED as a noun of West Indian origin meaning 'a confused or noisy

situation', it is colloquially invoked by McMillan to mean gossip. 'Black Cake', one of the few foods McMillan asserts is served in the front room, is made with minced fruit soaked in rum and black wine.

<sup>24</sup> McMillan, *West Indian Front Room*, p. 54.

<sup>25</sup> As quoted by Michael Hallett in 'Individual Concerns', *Sharp Voices/Still Lives: Birmingham Photography in the 1980s* (Cornerhouse on behalf of Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery: Manchester, 1990) p. 15-16.

<sup>26</sup> Maxine Walker, 'Boxed Gems', *Polareyes*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1987, p. 12..

<sup>27</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Harcourt Brace: New York, 1989 ed. (originally published 1929), p.4.

<sup>28</sup> Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, p. 19.

<sup>29</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p.5.

<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, it is not possible to reproduce this image here. Readers can access it in print in *Sharp Voices/Still Lives: Birmingham Photography in the 1980s*

<sup>31</sup> Tawadros, 'Redrawing the Boundaries', p.90.

<sup>32</sup> bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (South End Press: Boston, 1992) p. 116.

<sup>33</sup> hooks, *Yearning*, p.41.

<sup>34</sup> See: Michelle Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (Dial Press: New York, 1979).

<sup>35</sup> Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (Serpent's Tail: London, 1993) p.197.

<sup>36</sup> Gilroy, *Small Acts*, p. 231.

<sup>37</sup> A movement from 'Roots to routes' is used by Gilroy in reference to the works of and forms a central tenet of his configuration of the Black Atlantic as a super-national space of exchange and movement rather than a place fixed by the search for racial and cultural authenticity that he finds to be a deeply problematic fixture of the cultural nationalism of Afrocentrism and, later, Americo-centrism.

<sup>38</sup> Walker, 'Boxed Gems', p. 12..

<sup>39</sup> hooks, *Yearning*, p. 42.

<sup>40</sup> McMillan, *The West Indian Front Room*, p. 153.

<sup>41</sup> Martin Slavin, 'Colour Supplement Living', *Ten.8*, no. 23, 1986, p.5.

<sup>42</sup> Slavin, 'Colour Supplement Living', p. 18.

<sup>43</sup> hooks, *Yearning*, p.49.

<sup>44</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Aspiration and Attitude...Reflections on Black Britain in the Nineties', *New Formations: Frontlines/Backyards*, special edition, 1998, p. 38.

Hall's model shares interesting similarities with Erving Goffman's frontstage/backstage theory. However, where Goffman's focus is on the role-play of the actor on the stage, Hall's framework opens up and interrogates the spaces of exchange between 'actor' and 'audience'. See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Anchor Books: New York, 1959).

<sup>45</sup> See: Polly Savage, 'Playing to the Gallery: Masks, Masquerade and Museums', *African Arts*, vol. 41, no.4, 2008, p. 74.

<sup>46</sup> It is worth noting that, in his text for *West Indian Front Room* and in the project's televised counterpart, McMillan does engage with individual elements of the front room as signifiers (for example, the choice of pattern and colour in

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wallpaper, carpets, and other furnishings; the prevalence of certain prints or pictures). However, the aesthetic itself is rooted in bringing them all together.

<sup>47</sup> Kobena Mercer, 'Black Hair/Style Politics', *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (Routledge: New York, 1994) pp. 97-130. (p.102) first published in *New Formations*, 3, 1987, pp. 33-54.

<sup>48</sup> Mercer, 'Black Hair/Style Politics', p. 101.

<sup>49</sup> Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (University of California Press: Oakland, 1980), p.117.

<sup>50</sup> Michel Foucault trans. by Jay Miskowiec, 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias', *Architecture/Mouvementi/Continuité*, 1984, accessed online at [web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf](http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf) (11 Nov, 2013)

<sup>51</sup> Mark Sealy and Stuart Hall, *Different* (Phaidon: London, 2001), p. 58.

<sup>52</sup> Sealy and Hall, *Different*, p.58

<sup>53</sup> hooks, *Yearning*, p.42.

## Image Captions

**Fig. 1** Maxine Walker, *Auntie Linda*, 1988. Courtesy Autograph/ABP.

**Fig. 2** Sonia Boyce, *Auntie Enid – The Pose*, watercolour, pastel and crayon on paper. © Sonia Boyce. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2016.

**Fig. 3** Maxine Walker, *Her Room* from the *Black Beauty* series, 1991. Courtesy Autograph/ABP.

**Fig. 4** Maxine Walker, *Her* from the *Black Beauty* series, 1991. Courtesy Autograph/ABP.

**Fig. 5** Maxine Walker, *Cleansing* from the *Black Beauty* series, 1991. Courtesy Autograph/ABP.

I have obtained print & online clearance for all images.